

From Readers to Writers to Actors!

By Jeri Wyn Gillie , Susan Ingle and Heidi Mumford

As teachers we often ignore potential sources of reading texts which can be used in our classes. We also often overlook the many possible activities that can evolve from a single reading passage. Student- produced writing can offer a rich source of reading material for our ESL/EFL classrooms. In addition, student-produced texts can act as the catalyst for new materials and activities created in response to the writing.

In our intermediate-level reading/writing classes, we use student-produced narratives for a series of classroom activities, all of which move the students from readers to writers to actors. Our students begin by reading student-generated essays, then move to writing as they convert the essays to readers theater scripts, and finally finish by acting out their own material. This cycle of reader, writer, and actor using and creating student-generated material gives the students experience with a variety of language skills and tasks, and also gives ESL/EFL writing a real audience, something that is often missing in writing classroom activities. The following is an explanation of how this cycle of reading, writing, and acting can be implemented in a classroom.

Creating a Readers Theater Script

Before this series of activities can be introduced in the classroom it is necessary to have at least one example of a narrative and a readers theater script created from that same narrative. (We have provided an example of both at the conclusion of this article.) Before the students write their own readers theater, they will need to read one or two readers theater scripts to introduce themselves to this genre of writing. These scripts are written either by teachers or by students from previous classes; ideally, they should be based on student-written narratives. If student narratives are not available, any short story or portion of a novel can be used, but using student-generated texts as the basis for readers theater gives the students the sense that what they produce is worthwhile literature.

When creating readers theater scripts, try to find stories that readily lend themselves to script form. Look for both an interesting plot and a story with several characters. Don't be adverse to adding a character or two to the original plot along with at least one narrator to provide extra speaking parts.

Whether using teacher- or student-generated scripts, the readers theater used in class should be based on stories that are familiar to the students. Using readers theater based on material that has been previously read and discussed is important because the students' earlier exposure helps build story schemata. Having the necessary background knowledge will make the reading and writing of readers theater scripts much easier for the students.

Reading a Readers Theater

Once a few scripts have been created, the classroom activities can begin. To start, have the students read and discuss the original narrative text. Next, introduce them to the readers theater version of the narrative. This may be their first encounter with this form of narrative writing in English, so it is essential to take some time to talk about how a readers theater works. First, introduce any new vocabulary the students may need such as *play*, *script*, *props*, and *narrator*. Then divide the reading parts among the class members, giving each reader a few moments to become familiar with his/her lines and the stage directions (*speak in a whisper*, *loudly*, *nervously*) before attempting a first reading.

As the students read their parts, make sure that the proper sound effects are included at appropriate moments in the script. Typically, the sound effects must be handled by the teacher the first time a readers theater is used in the classroom. As the students become more familiar with the script and the dramatic nature of the readers theater, they will want to take turns providing the sound effects. Read the same readers theater several times so that everyone has a chance to have at least one opportunity to participate.

In readers theater, the parts do not have to be memorized. The students like the security of sitting in a circle or at their desks with their scripts in front of them. With multiple readings of the same script, the students' ability to read more fluently and with more feeling will increase. If time allows, read additional readers theater scripts based on other narrative texts the students have previously read and are familiar with.

A readers theater can pull the readers into a story even more powerfully than the original text could. Often when a story is presented in readers theater form, the students appreciate the excitement, drama, or humor better as they take on the parts of the characters in the story, and as sound effects are added.

From Reading to Writing a Readers Theater

After the students have been introduced to readers theater and have had the opportunity to read at least one script, ask them to write their own readers theater scripts. To do this, divide the students into small groups and give each group the assignment to create a readers theater from a story read earlier in class. Don't feel obligated to provide a different story for each group; in fact, you can assign two groups the same story. This allows the students to see that there is more than one way a single story can be interpreted. Invariably, each group will put its own spin on the tale, and often, the two groups come up with quite different scripts.

Allow the students two or three 50- minute class periods to write and practice their scripts. Encourage them to create extra characters if necessary so that everyone in the group can participate. Also, encourage them to use sound effects, stage directions (i.e. where to move, how to speak), and props. Offer feedback, suggestions or advice if the students ask or as you see fit, but for the most part, let the students work out the give and take of writing and producing their

readers theater. This kind of activity offers the students an opportunity to use real communicative language and skills in the classroom.

After the groups have produced their first draft, the drafts can be exchanged with another group or given to the teacher for content and editing feedback. If computers are available and the students have sufficient typing skills, encourage them to type the final draft of their scripts so that all members of the group can have a polished final draft.

From Writing to Acting in a Readers Theater

Once the final drafts are complete the students can begin working on the public performance of their scripts. As the students practice their scripts, they usually realize that much of the success of their production (especially any jokes) depends on the proper pronunciation of their script. To make sure that their speech is clear and loud enough, include some teacher or peer feedback during the rehearsal stage to ensure proper clarity and volume.

Although a readers theater can be preformed by actors who remain seated holding their scripts, the students may opt to move around the stage as they read their parts. In fact, by the day of the performances the actors are often able to abandon their scripts altogether. Most of the time they have completely memorized their parts as a result of the repeated readings during the practice sessions.

The day the readers theaters are performed, if possible, make arrangements to videotape the productions. While one group performs, the other groups can be the audience. The rewards for both teacher and students are great as they experience the fusion of the students' creative and communicative skills. Even though they enjoy watching each other, the students really love watching themselves on video tape. The readers theater tapes created in our classes have been so delightful that we usually play the tape several times for our students and even other classes.

At the beginning of every semester we tell our students that we like to use their writing as texts for immediate and future class use. The students' writing is used by permission only. We have created a simple release form that we have our students sign which gives us permission to use their writing. The students have been flattered when we ask to use something they have written. Without exception, they have happily consented to let us use their works.

Conclusion

This series of reading, writing, and acting activities provides ESL/EFL students with various creative and communicative opportunities to use English. But it also uses, expands, and enriches student-generated texts which may otherwise never have an audience beyond the classroom teacher. Narrative texts and readers theater scripts produced by one class can be used as the examples which will introduce subsequent classes to this delightful form of narrative writing. In

addition, when the students create readers theater based on their own writing or other students' texts, they can readily see how powerful their own writing can be. As teachers, let's not overlook these important sources of texts and activities for our reading and writing classrooms.

An example of a student-produced narrative text and the readers theater script written by a team of students based on the original narrative:

Camping With A Wolf!

by Y. Yu

When I was 20 years old I really liked to go camping with my friends. One day my friends and I decided to go on a camping trip, but this time we had a new plan. We wanted to find a place that was strange, a place where nobody lived; so we picked a forest outside of the city. I had once heard someone say that there were a lot of ghosts living in that forest. However, we thought this place would be very interesting to us, so we decided to go anyway.

It was a nice day, the sun was shining. We prepared everything we needed. We were so happy because we would have a new experience. When we arrived at this strange place the sun was setting. Everything looked golden and very beautiful. We could see the lake where there were a lot of fish swimming. It made me so excited. I hoped I could catch a lot of fish. However, the sky became dark very quickly and we couldn't see anything. Through the darkness we could see the moon and stars in the sky. It was a wonderful night sky.

At midnight we were asleep. Suddenly, I heard a strange sound from the forest, "Hooooo.Wooooo." That reminded me that there were supposed to be a lot of ghosts in this place. I was scared, so I nudged my friend and asked him if he heard anything. He told me not to be silly, there was nothing to be afraid of. But I couldn't sleep anymore, so I went out of the tent. I saw a big thing moving very fast in the forest. It was a huge animal. I could also see its eyes glowing. They seemed so hungry. It looked like a wolf, but I had never heard of Taiwan having wolves so I woke my friend up. I was really scared. I told him that maybe it would eat us.

We tried to find the animal. We walked through the dark forest. I was getting more and more scared. Suddenly, the animal appeared; it was moving fast and jumped at us. It

wanted to bite us, so we fought with it. I took a piece of wood to try to kill this crazy animal. I hit the animal with the wood. I could see that my hand got some blood on it. The animal stopped moving. I moved closer to see this animal that had frightened me so much. When I looked at the animal, I saw that it was a big black dog. It was so strange. Why was there a dog out here? Why did he jump at me like he wanted to hurt me? Everybody woke up and they saw me. I had blood all over my clothing.

Then, I felt so sad because I realized that I had killed a dog. I had never killed anything in my life before. I have tried to be much more kind to animals since I killed the dog, and I have sworn to never kill anything again in my life.

Dance With A "Wolf"

(Readers Theater)

by Daniel, Gerardo, and Takeshi

Narrator: One day, two friends decided to go on a camping trip. They wanted to find a place that was strange, where nobody lived, so they picked a forest outside the city.

Sazae: *(so scared)* There are a lot of ghosts living in that forest.

Pedro: *(very brave)* That may be true; however, I think it would be very interesting for us to camp there.

Narrator: And so they decided to go camping anyway.

Sazae: It is a nice day for camping. This is going to be really fun!

Narrator: They prepared all that they needed. They were so happy because they would have a new experience. After a few hours, they arrived in the perfect place.

Pedro: *(with a smile on his face)* I can see the lake where there are a lot of fish. I hope that I can catch a lot of fish. *(pretends to hold a fishing pole and catch a fish)*

Narrator: The sky became dark very quickly.

Sazae: *(squinting)* Man, it's so dark. I can't see anything! But look at all the stars!

Narrator: They were looking at the stars in the sky for a

	long time. <i>(Pedro and Sazae look up and point to the sky)</i> While they were looking suddenly they heard something.
Wolf:	Hooooo.Wooooo.
Sazae:	<i>(nudging Pedro)</i> Did you hear that?
Pedro:	<i>(so scared)</i> Yes! It sounded like a ghost!
Wolf:	Hooooo.Wooooo.
Narrator:	In the forest the boys saw something moving and they could hear footsteps coming towards them. <i>(footstep noise)</i> And then they began to hear the footsteps getting louder, louder, louder, and louder.
Sazae:	<i>(he runs behind a rock)</i> Hey Pedro, it's coming this way. Follow me!
Pedro:	<i>(following Sazae, whispering)</i> I think the ghost is trying to find us.
Narrator:	Then they saw the "ghost." It was really just a big dog lost in the forest.
Sazae:	Hey it's a dog! He looks hungry and mean. He might bite us. Quickly, let's climb the rock!
Pedro:	Good idea! Help me up, hurry! <i>(Sazae takes Pedro's hand and pulls him up)</i>
Dog/Wolf:	<i>(Circling the rock looking at the boys)</i> Grrrr....
Sazae:	We can't go down off the rock because this dog is very fierce.
Pedro:	I have an idea! <i>(takes some small rocks, throws them at the dog)</i>
Wolf:	<i>(escaping and crying)</i> Au, Au, Aoo.
Pedro:	<i>(excited, happy)</i> He's gone. That was close! Let's go back to the tent.
Sazae:	<i>(sleepy)</i> Yeah, I'm so tired. We need to get some rest, we've gotta lot of fishing to do tomorrow.
Pedro:	Sounds good! <i>(the boys go back to the tent)</i>
	The End

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